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Towards a Theory of Geekery

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Introduction

Geekery, the quality of being a geek, or of geeking, is much misunderstood. It is widely seen as a social dysfunction, where a person has developed an unhealthy obsession with a non-mainstream topic (though it is the non-mainstreamness of the topic, rather than the depth of obsession, which creates the perception that it is unhealthy). Much has been written about the psychological implications of engaging in such behaviours:

> These studies present evidence that individuals may engage in geek culture in order
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> to maintain narcissistic self-views (the great fantasy migration hypothesis), to fulfill
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> belongingness needs (the belongingness hypothesis), and to satisfy needs for
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> creative expression (the need for engagement hypothesis)" (McCain, et al, 2015).

This tends towards a largely negative interpretation of what geekery is and does, marginalising geekery by medicalising it. As with many studies of marginalised identities, it takes an entirely 'outsider' view, by excluding the voices of geeks themselves, thus placing accountability for their marginalisation on those who are marginalised, rather than on society.

I propose that geekery is something else entirely: a mode of learning. Specifically, it is learning where there is no functional gain outside of the learning; or where any

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functional gain is secondary. Geeky learning exists primarily for its own sake. Children and adults are encouraged to learn because we are supposed to be productive and useful, or to meet our developmental milestones. With geekery, we learn for the joy of learning. This puts encouragement and promotion of geekery, in my view, firmly in the purview of community education, because more conventional institutions such as schools and universities are more output-focussed, and therefore find it difficult to promote learning as a goal unto itself.

The topic about which one geeks can vary hugely. It is important not to stereotype geekery as only the domain of widely recognised 'geeky' topics, such as science fiction and fantasy, roleplaying games or computer science. That geeks engage solely in archetypal geekeries seems to be the assumption behind the above article; it is, however, nonsense. Geekery can be about anything. Former Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn, for example, outed himself as a manhole-covers geek, and drew Britain's attention to the existence of this small but significant subculture (Kirby, 2015).

Whatever the topic of the geekery, it is a method of/attitude to learning, where the learner decides what to learn and how to learn it; where the learning is primarily an end rather than a means; and where the depth of engagement is notably strong. Depth of engagement is the key aspect, because it controls the quality of learning.

An important aspect of this idea is that it is impossible to be entertained without learning. This statement is likely to be controversial, but learning is cognitive exploration; entertainment is cognitive, sensory and/or emotional stimulation. One leads inevitably to another. This is not to say, of course, that all entertainment leads to an equal quality of education. Indeed, sometimes the educational outcome of being entertained is minimal. The geek does not, however, simply enjoy what entertains them and then move on. The geek wants to deepen their engagement. The geek has lengthy conversations about a technical detail or 'what if?' of their geekery. The geek

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accumulates encyclopaedic knowledge and cultivates boundless enthusiasm. The geek may write fan fiction, dress up or attend conventions, join clubs or societies. A wildflower geek may learn not only the names and nicknames of a vast number of flowers, but the folklore behind those names. The geek *learns* - and learns magnificently.

One aspect of depth of engagement which tends to set geeks apart is reduced underthinking. I use this term to refer to behaviour which would typically be defined as 'overthinking'; but it may be said that there is no such thing. We live in a society that actively encourages underthinking, thus reduced underthinking appears as overthinking. Public reduced underthinking may prompt an incredulous underthinker to say, 'Get a life'. This is the way society has programmed us to respond.

One example of reduced underthinking is the response to the Riddle of the Hatter, featured in the novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865). The riddle, 'Why is a raven like a writing desk?' remains unsolved, and it is reasonable to assume, since it was posed by a self-confessed madman in a fictional child's dreamscape dedicated to nonsense, that it was never intended to have a solution. It is frankly rather beautiful that this has never stopped Alice-geeks from trying to find one. *The Annotated Alice* (Gardner, 2001) gives an insight into the history of such efforts, noting that Carroll himself, in a later edition (having been roundly badgered by contemporary geeks), proposed the solution: 'Because it can produce a few notes, though they are very flat; and it is nevar put with the wrong end in front!" His deliberate misspelling of 'never as 'nevar' – 'raven' backwards – was corrected by an editor and not discovered until 1976. 'Because Poe wrote on both' is a clever answer proposed by Sam Lloyd, who also enjoyed some wordplay-geekery with 'Because the notes for which they are noted are not noted for being musical notes'. The Lewis Carroll Society ran a contest in 1989, national newspapers have run competitions, and all manner of thinkers have had a go over the course of over 150 years. The bulk of

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answers involve puns on notes or bills; however some answers have been ingenious or silly or both: 'Because there's a B in both, and an N in neither'. The hunt for an answer to this riddle is a prime example of geekery, because many have enjoyed participation in a learning process from which there is no money to be made, no empires to be built, no technological innovation to be discovered and, as far as I know, no sexual partners to be wooed. The learning here takes place purely because it is delightful.

The social and economic dynamics of fictional worlds have been explored, debated and pondered a great deal by fans. The post-scarcity economics of Star Trek, for example, are explored in detail in the book *Trekonomics* (Saadia, 2016). In Star Trek's fictional future, material needs are provided for by technology, thus human beings are free to pursue the challenge of improving themselves. Saadia examines the details of how this system effects the way of life and nature of work, and examines the apparent contradictions in the way this is presented in the various incarnations of the franchise.

A particularly pertinent quote from this book is: 'Why work at all if it's not necessary? Because learning, making, and sharing is what makes life in the Federation worth living.'

This fictional economic system, then, serves as a reflection of geekery itself. The idea of doing something without the possibility of economic gain can be hard to grasp from within the confines of our economy-soaked, neoliberal society… except to the geek, who already knows that learning is a thing that can and should take place without material incentive. Perhaps this explains, in part, why the franchise is as attractive to geeks as it is. Science fiction is uniquely placed to empower us to look at our own society objectively, and say, 'but what if it wasn't like that?' Is such a society possible? Desirable? Utopian? Dystopian? Inherently Socialist? Inherently Fascist? Arguments go on.

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It is not necessary, however, to contemplate riddles in classic literature or futuristic economics to be a geek. One can do it by looking at the clouds. To look at clouds and acknowledge that they are pretty, then get on with one's day, is not a very geeky way to behave; but to decide that that cloud looks like a dinosaur, or that one a boa constrictor digesting an elephant, is to enter the realm of geekery because an extra layer of creative thought has been added to the entertaining pastime, and learning with no material gain has taken place.

Or, one might casually look up what ducks smell like on an internet search engine, because it came up in conversation. Geekery does not require a lasting interest in its subject. Geeky learning will progress in any direction it pleases, without regard to the objective usefulness of that which is learned. It is precisely this which makes geekery the purest form of learning: it is always more an end than a means.

How is the geek defined? There are three possibilities:

1. Self-definition. The geek is one who self-identifies as such.
2. Social definition. Society defines the geek.
3. Independent definition. Someone who fits the established criteria is a geek, regardless of what anyone thinks.

Community educators are likely to be drawn to self-definition, because self-determination is so much a part of our philosophy. However, there is at least one major problem with it. Most people still see the word as pejorative, and therefore many who would be geeks are reluctant to call themselves that, especially if their geekeries are not widely recognised as such. Conversely, one may consider oneself a geek whilst not engaging very deeply at all.

The social definition has even more problems, including that society is relentlessly hostile to the geek, and that its standards are arbitrary and constantly changing. There

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was a relatively recent time when simply having an email address was enough to be labelled an 'anorak' (a pejorative derived from the waterproof jacket believed to be preferred by trainspotters). The 'geek' label is bestowed by society only upon those whose geekery is socially unacceptable. If one cares very deeply about a television show, knows the names of all the characters and actors, maintains strong opinions about future plot-directions and will buy a newspaper or magazine purely on the basis that one of the actors is mentioned, this behaviour is well within the bounds of social normality if the show in question is EastEnders. Not so much Battlestar Galactica.

Consider also football. To be knowledgeable and passionate about the sport, to know details of players, managers and results past and present of one's favourite team, to have and express strong opinions about tactics and personnel, to fork out hundreds of pounds for a season ticket and travel hundreds of miles on a regular basis to see them play, are all considered within the range of normal behaviour for football fans. Cosplay is actively encouraged. A phenomenal depth of engagement which, for almost any other interest, would be considered profoundly geeky, is unlikely to attract the 'geek' label. Society's understanding of geekery is clearly not to be trusted.

This leaves the independent definition, wherein, whilst a measure of interpretation and opinion must always be involved, it is accepted that geekery is a mode of learning, and that depth of engagement is the key identifying factor.

It is worth considering the reasons for society's near-relentless hostility towards geekery, which I believe to be rooted in the need of a society to exert control over the education of its citizens. When people learn because they want a job, a better job, a car that works or an approved certificate, society exerts some control over who learns what and how, and what impact that learning has on the thinking of most citizens. When people learn for the hell of it, fluid thinking occurs and society exerts limited control, which means it is in society's interest to restrict the practice of geekery to a

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marginalised minority, as shown in Englehart's article 'The nerd as the other' (2012). This article explores the marginalisation of the nerd or geek by comparing society's approach to geekery today in popular culture to the abuses of disabled people in freak shows in the past:

> This analytical case study on the representations of nerds in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and *Beauty and the Geek* has made explicit by which means nerds are constructed as 'the other'. Inspired by representations of disabled people in the American freak show tradition, the analysis has shown that nerds deviate from the norm as they do not correspond to hegemonic forms of masculinity.

In both instances, deviation from the norm is presented as a spectacle to be enjoyed by others, and to comfort people who would see themselves as normal by creating the dichotomy of 'normal people' and 'freaks', and encouraging a feeling of thankfulness that one is not like 'them'.

This phenomenon may be considered in the light of what Davis (1995) says in *Enforcing Normalcy*: 'When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants.' He talks of a 'tyranny of the norm.' To Davis, society creates the disability, but also an artificial 'norm', to which individuals are expected to aspire, and thus society marginalises disabled people by medicalising disability. It may be said that a similar thing is happening to geekery. Society marginalises those who fail to conform to its artificial norms in a variety of ways.

It is important to distinguish between 'society' as it should be – the structure of mutual care to which most people contribute and from which all people benefit – and 'society' as it more often is: a structure of oppression. The former has no problem with the

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geek; the latter has a large one. Freire (1972) notes that people oppressed by such a society 'prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom.' 'Creative communion' strikes me as a remarkably accurate definition of geekery. People who are, themselves, oppressed, can become complicit in the oppression of themselves and others, and this may manifest in popular hostility to geekery. In this light, it is easy to see that geekery threatens society-as-oppressor because it gives control of what to learn and how to learn it to the learner, and treats learning itself as an end, rather than a means to an end of which society approves. It is in the interests of individual learners to be as free as possible to choose their mode and content of learning, even in defiance of society; it is also in the interests of society-as-care-structure to be populated by such learners. It therefore seems clear that community educators ought to encourage and respect geekery as a mode of learning.

This can be done in a number of ways:

- By placing the learner at the centre of their learning – This is what community educators do in any event, taking the learner's own interests as a starting point, and making learning as a goal the focus.

- By challenging the marginalisation of geekery – We challenge the marginalisation of other groups, so why not geekery? The main barrier to this is that geek-shaming language and the attitude behind it are so ubiquitous, it may be hard to notice when one is doing it. One doesn't have to speak Klingon to experience this.

- By facilitating geekery-swaps – Creating safe spaces in which people may share as broad a range as possible of geeky interests.

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- By reducing and removing barriers – Since being a geek is already culturally difficult, many people face additional barriers to accessing this mode of education, for example, if they already belong to a marginalised group.

- By campaigning for a citizens' income – The moral imperative to let no citizen drop below a certain level of poverty would also give people greater freedom to explore their interests, to develop geekeries, and to learn… about Dungeons and Dragons or drain-covers.

- By doing the research – As this theory of geekery represents a new way of understanding the term, a great deal of knowledge remains to be collected. What are the current social attitudes to geekery, and how are they changing? What is the relationship between obvious and less obvious geekeries? What are the barriers in terms of gender, race, social class, etc? What, if any, are the benefits to society and to the individual from this mode of learning? What transferable skills emerge, and transferable to what? What, if any, is the relationship between geekery and autism? What makes some people embrace and others scorn geekery? These are some of the questions that need answers.

Geekery is a mode of learning unlike any other. Some will tell you that learning is a tool by which one improves one's employment prospects; others that it is a way for society to instil its values and/or correct the behaviour of individuals; for some it is to develop useful skills; for others it is the key to social change or even a prerequisite to revolution. Arguments abound about what the point of learning is, but to the geek, learning *is* the point.

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